

Hex Holdings

Workbased Learning – Skills for Life

Name of Contact : Stephen Pardoe

E Mail address : Stephen.Pardoe@loucoll.ac.uk

Background:

Hex Holdings is a family business supplying crash repair parts to the motor vehicle repair industry. The company is based in Shepshed, Leics, but with depots throughout the East Midlands. The company was put in contact with Loughborough College by an LSC business advisor, whilst advising on IIP.

Training Requirements

2 basic skills issues identified in discussions with Hex were:

- Basic customer care skills (e.g. telephone enquiries, form filling, etc)
- Numeracy skills (e.g. costing/invoicing, calculating percentage discounts, ratios for mixing fillers/paints, metric units, understanding sales charts)

The company decided that numeracy was their priority.

Loughborough College staff visited the company's head office for an escorted tour, during which an audit was carried out of numeracy skills used in work processes. Examples of numeracy-related brochures & charts used by the company were also gathered.

Based on the audit, a 30-hour numeracy course was devised, leading to the national tests at levels 1 and 2 (with scope to modify for entry levels). Company brochures, charts and other materials were used or adapted as teaching materials for the course.

Identification of learners

Participants for the first course were identified by company management. A spread of employees from a range of local depots were invited to a 3-hour induction/assessment session at the head office, during which they experienced:

- An ice-breaker
- An overview of the course content
- ‘taster’ activities
- BSA Numeracy Initial Assessment
- Individual interviews

Course Organisation

Due to the travelling time involved, the course was organised in 4 hour sessions, over a period of 9 weeks (i.e. 36 GLH). For subsequent courses, this was changed to 3-hour sessions over 12 weeks, as 4 hours proved a long time to maintain interest and motivation in numeracy.

A copy of the scheme of work is appended.

Participation & Achievement

2 courses ran during the 2003-04 academic year, and a further course is currently running. Participation & achievement on the first 2 courses were:

- Enrolled 13
- Retained 10
- Achieved 9

Of the 9 who achieved *Skills for Life* numeracy qualifications:

- 2 achieved at Entry 3
- 4 achieved at Level 1
- 3 achieved at Level 2

In addition to accredited achievements, management highlighted:

- increased confidence of employees in dealing with figure work
- increased knowledge of the wider company & its processes

as a major positive outcomes.

Key Action Points for Success

- Involvement of LSC advisor in making initial contact

- Enthusiasm of manager within the company to take the project forward
- Time spent by college staff in auditing company processes & embedding these with the course & course materials
- Use of national tests to provide a focus & target for participants (though the lack of flexibility with national tests meant it was not possible to relate all aspects of the course to company processes)
- Regular liaison with the company

Developing an effective basic skills programme in an SME

KEY WORDS

- Basic Skills
- SME
- Learning Mentor
- Learning Culture

SUMMARY

This project is about improving all aspects of the provision of workplace basic skills in an SME, thereby improving the learning experience of employees, stimulating the growth of a learning culture and contributing to the continued success of the company.

This was achieved by:

- reviewing, improving and developing key processes in our provision
- evaluating the impact of learning on the learners and the company
- identifying the key factors of success in the project
- providing good practice guidelines for implementation with other learners

It had not been anticipated the extent to which success was dependent on having the key processes well-developed and in place and particularly the importance of identifying a key figure as learning mentor to stimulate, encourage and support learning.

These findings will be used to inform the planning and future development of all workplace basic skills programmes offered by the college. The impact on the company in terms of developing confidence and an appetite for learning amongst employees, leading to increased uptake of other opportunities, has been significant.

Context

Loughborough College provides workplace basic skills for an increasing number of employers in Charnwood, N.W. Leicestershire and the City of

Leicester. It works with public and private sector organisations, ranging in size from large companies to SMEs.

The college is part of Leicestershire's Employer Training Pilot, 'Skills at Work', which aims to provide employers with training up to level 2, along with release costs dependent on company size and learners working towards qualifications at Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2. The college works closely with LSC brokers and advisers, who identified the need for basic skills training during discussions with the company about Investors in People.

The company, Hex holdings, a family run business, employs 130 people over a number of sites across the East Midlands and South West. (This project focussed solely on the East Midlands.) It is involved with the distribution of car parts to manufacturers, small companies and individual customers. It has a predominantly male workforce, the majority being aged between 20 and 35, many negative previous learning experiences. At the outset of the project, training was not seen as a priority nor identified as a key success factor. The main champion for introducing training is the current Managing Director.

Two cohorts of learners were recruited and changes were made to the second course, in the light of findings from the first, with the aim of continuous quality improvement.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to examine key processes in relation to the college's offer to the employer, as an example of a typical SME.

Main objectives were:

1. To design, develop and deliver training which matched the needs of the employer and employee and which satisfied LSC funding requirements
2. To research all stages of delivery in terms of effectiveness for the learner
3. To ensure the learners were at the heart of learning
4. To achieve high retention and achievement rates, thus contributing to LSC targets

5. To examine college based processes and contribute to their development, leading to more effective, high quality delivery for all workplace basic skills learners
6. To examine the role of learning mentor and its importance as a success factor in completion of the project
7. To improve the learning experience of all learners and to develop their appetite for learning
8. To feedback all findings to college tutors and managers, other providers, the LSC, thus providing examples of good practice to inform future delivery

STRATEGIES

Reviewing, improving and developing key processes in our provision

It had been considered at the outset of the project that our processes were more than adequate, based on experiences of working with other companies and organisations. However much of what was done was based on assumptions and this project gave us the opportunity to analyse them more thoroughly and gain an understanding of the whole process of engaging with an employer, particularly an SME with the additional problems of dispersed employment centres, travel implications and difficulty of finding staff cover.

Engaging with Employers

As a result of the involvement of one of Leicestershire's LSC business advisers, a meeting was arranged to explain what the college could provide in terms of basic skills training and how it could be customised to meet business needs. Further meetings were arranged, including visits to the main warehouse and a branch store to undertake a job skill analysis.

A **skills audit** was undertaken and given to tutor/s prior to course to inform planning. Tutors were also issued with an **Employer checklist** to communicate information about the company and internal contacts.

Engaging with learners

A 3 hour taster or **Welcome Session** was developed which included introductions, an icebreaker, information about course content, 1-1 interviews, Initial Assessment and a fun taster activity.

Evidence from learner questionnaires and exit interviews suggests that this induction or Welcome Session played a vital role in settling learners onto the course and later successful completion.

78% of learners felt that it had helped them to feel more at ease, as they didn't know what to expect and were feeling apprehensive about what it involved. It was seen as an opportunity to meet the tutors and others on the course and to get information and ask questions. One participant commented,

“I felt better after this. I wondered what it was about and didn't really know anyone.”

When learners were asked about possible improvements suggestions mentioned clear information or a memo to staff beforehand with a brief outline of what would be covered on the course and the benefits of attending.

Individual Learning Plans

A **customised workplace ILP** was developed for this course, as it was felt that the existing ILP used in college was not entirely suitable for this shorter 'Skills at Work course.

On- going improvements are being made in the light of using this ILP. Research revealed the importance of being able to work on own areas of need as recorded on individual ILPs.

When asked how this course compared to previous learning experiences, all of the learners felt that they had benefited from working in small groups with attention to their individual needs.

Comments included:

“More 1-1 help. The tutor comes round and helps individually,”

“I’ve done no training since school. This has been better – less people in class and more chance of individual attention.”

Role of Learning Mentor

The Learning Mentor originally identified in this project attended the first Welcome Session, but was not able to continue in this role of supporting and encouraging learners and dealing with potential difficulties.

Mid- way through the project it became obvious that the Managing Director was taking a close personal interest in all participants and had adopted the learning mentor role. One of the employees commented:

“Being in a small company helps, there’s always someone to talk to. The MD knows everyone. He chats to us and asks how the course is going.”

However, although having this support and encouragement was identified as one of the important factors in the overall success of the training, the need to put it on a more formal footing was discussed in the review with the MD at the end of the course.

He acknowledged the need for someone to have an overview ‘*of who has achieved what to communicate back to the line managers*’. He felt that in the future he would involve the branch managers as learning mentors to support and encourage their own staff, with an input from college to explain the training and what had been achieved.

Development of contextualised materials

Learning was customised wherever possible to relate directly to the workplace situation and appropriate materials developed. When asked if the course was relevant to their work situation replies included,

“Yes - mental arithmetic and shortcuts particularly useful”

“Yes – some parts, for example percentages”

“Yes, dealing with methods of working things out, such as VAT”

Other learners mentioned working in metric, better estimating skills and ratios. Some participants (44%) felt that only some of it had been made relevant and one person mentioned “*we could do more in between sessions to relate it to our work situation.*”

However this was affected by the ETP requirements for learners to achieve a national qualification at Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2, as some aspects of the Core Curriculum were more difficult to relate directly to this particular work situation.

The development of contextualised materials is seen as an on-going process, with the stock of materials continually being improved and extended.

Communication within the workplace basic skills team

This project emphasised the need to have clear lines of communication and regular team feedback sessions to discuss workplace issues. Monthly meetings were established to include progress updates, problem solving and the sharing of good practice, with the aim of continuous improvement of our workplace offer to employers.

Accreditation

Nationally recognised accreditation was offered to all learners as part of the course.

However the importance of offering accreditation as a means of increasing motivation was much greater than anticipated. Evidence shows that it was a prime factor for both the learners and the company. All learners who completed improved by one level, and some by two levels. The increase in confidence as a result of this played a key part in encouraging more learners to come on the course and open up progression opportunities for others.

When asked if they felt it would be useful to gain a national numeracy qualification, 89% answered positively with comments such as,

“Yes. I have a very low GCSE Maths grade, so this will improve my CV”

“Yes – useful in every job you do”

“Nice to have a qualification – something to show what you’ve done”

Celebration of success

College certificates of attendance are awarded to all learners on completion of a course and this can play a significant part in the growth of confidence for learners who would not have taken up learning opportunities if they had not been offered in the workplace

The Managing Director of this company recognises these factors and is arranging a presentation of certificates event with key management personnel present to celebrate the success of the learners.

Outcomes

Key processes relating to developing an effective programme were examined through discussion with colleagues and tutors, interviews with the Managing Director and learners, questionnaires, retention and achievement data.

The main outcomes are outlined below:

Retention and achievement

% achievement up 1 level up 2 levels BAR Chart

Commitment to training

The training of two cohorts of learners at Hex has led to the uptake of further learning both in the workplace and in life outside of work, thus contributing to widening participation and the growth of lifelong learning.

The MD reported,

“Everyone is starting to accept the idea of the need for training”

“Everyone knows about the successes and the feedback encourages others”

He felt that the positive experience and success of the first cohort of learners had been vital in encouraging others to participate. He saw the presentation of certificates with the involvement of the Branch Managers as a key factor in keeping the momentum going.

He believes that the training has “*changed our opinion as to what we should be doing as a company*” and that it helps with flexibility, opening up opportunities both in the company and elsewhere. He cited several examples involving the increase in confidence as a result of the training, for example doing jobs that would have previously been avoided. One person had passed his driving theory test, as fear of tests had been broken down and barriers to formal learning had now been lifted.

Lessons for providers

- Business solutions, but learner centred and contextualised to the work situation
- Continuous improvement of provision – every group, every situation and every business is different
- Communication between all parties – providers, companies and learners - and at every level plays a vital part in success
- Importance of the identifying the right key person to act as learning mentor can not be underestimated
- Successful first group can be used to encourage others
- Celebration of success can play a part in the development of a learning culture and growth of lifelong learning for non traditional learners

Learning Points

- Companies need more help from providers with recruitment – a memo or A4 sheet with information about the course would help to allay initial fears about coming on the course.
- The employer needs a checklist with information about the course, key contacts and how they can help to support learners on the course, prior to the start of training.
- Development of materials contextualised to a particular workplace situation is seen as extremely important, but very time-consuming.
- Future Welcome Sessions to include a hopes/fears activity to give learners the opportunity to express what they hope to gain from the course and what they are concerned about.

- There is a need for a clearly identified learning mentor in each workplace, whose role is to encourage the uptake of learning, support learners on the course, help them to apply new skills in the work situation and communicate any concerns or difficulties.
- Close liaison will then be needed between the provider, teaching staff and the learning mentors.
- Communication within college teams is important, as tutors can often feel isolated when teaching in the workplace.

Next steps

- Presentation event
- 3 further cohorts of learners - training to reach all staff
- Other training being considered
- Possibility of networking on small industrial estate – reaching further learners – opening up training opps for SME employees
- Feedback of key points to LSC